Verwaltung der Staatlichen
Schlösser und Gärten

HESSEN

The Niederwalddenkmal near Rüdesheim am Rhein

Spaziergänge durch Schlösser und Gärten
Kulturerbe Hessen

The Niederwalddenkmal

A visit to the Niederwalddenkmal is a journey through German history. Situated at one of the most scenic lookout points of the Rhine Valley, the monument commemorates Germany's victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 and the subsequent foundation of the German Empire. The main inscription on the pedestal of the statue of Germania reads: "Zum Andenken an die einmuethige siegreiche Erhebung des deutschen Volkes und an die Wiederaufrichtung des deutschen Reiches 1870 – 1871." ("In memory of the unanimous, victorious uprising of the German people and the re-establishment of the German Empire 1870 – 1871.") Before this time, Germany had been divided into numerous independent states, but with the proclamation of King Wilhelm I of Prussia as German Emperor in January 1871 the foundation of a unified nation state succeeded for the first time. The Niederwalddenkmal – popularly referred to simply as 'Germania' – is not so much a victory monument as a German national monument.

The creation of a new external unity had to be followed by a process of internal unification, as most people continued to think of themselves first and foremost as Prussians, Bavarians or Saxons, and only secondly as Germans. The erection of national monuments such as the Siegessäule (Victory Column) in Berlin (1873), the Hermannsdenkmal (Hermann Monument) in the Teutoburg Forest (1875) or the Germania monument near Rüdesheim (1883) was therefore intended to awaken German national feeling. During the public debate on the question of a suitable location for a monument to commemorate the events of 1870–71, Ferdinand Heyl (who later became spa administration director in Wiesbaden) made a suggestion that proved to be decisive. In an article published in the "Rheinischer Kurier" newspaper on April 13, 1871, Heyl recommended an area above the ruins of Ehrenfels Castle in the Niederwald forest as a suitable location.

Postcard, c. 1890

There were a number of good reasons to erect a memorial near Rüdesheim am Rhein. In 1870–71 the soldiers going off to war had travelled via the nearby railway junction at Bingerbrück. For Heyl, the rapids of the Rhine at Binger Loch symbolised the German people's desire for national unification, and in addition, the Niederwald forest – situated at the "actual mid-point of the whole river" – and the neighbouring wine-growing areas were already very popular visitor destinations.

Wine labels from "Rüdesheimer Berg" vineyards, c. 1890

Once Emperor Wilhelm I and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck had given their approval, the plan to erect a monument to commemorate the foundation of the German Empire was put into action in September 1871. The competition to create the memorial was won by Johannes Schilling, a sculptor from Dresden, in spring 1874 with his design for a monumental statue of Germania.

With three hammer blows struck on September 16, 1877, Emperor Wilhelm I himself laid the foundation stone for the Niederwalddenkmal. The construction of the colossal monument, which has a total height of 38.18 metres, took six years; the 32,000 kg sculpture of Germania alone took the Ferdinand von Miller & Söhne foundry in Munich two and a half years to produce. Approximately one third of the metal used in the Niederwalddenkmal consisted of scrap bronze from the cannon foundry in Spandau. Out of respect for the former enemy in the war of 1870–71, none of the captured French gun barrels were melted down for this purpose.

The inauguration

EINWEIHUNG
des
National-Denkmals auf dem Niederwald
FREITAG DEN 28. SEPTEMBER 1883
MITTAGS 12 UHR.
Eintritts-Karte zum Festplatz.
Platz D & E, Zugang 6.
Die Karte ist sichtbar zu tragen.
Abfahrt von Rüdesheim auf den Niederwald ist nur bis 10½ Uhr gestattet.

Souvenir card of the unveiling of the Niederwalddenkmal on September 28, 1883.

September 28, 1883 was a momentous day in Rüdesheim. Most of the population of the Rheingau region turned out to celebrate the inauguration of the Niederwalddenkmal in the presence of Emperor Wilhelm I. The guests of honour were driven up to the festival ground some 225 metres above the Rhine in a procession of 113 carriages, whereby the monarch only narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by anarchists. After Wilhelm I and District President Count zu Eulenburg had made their speeches, the main relief panel of the Niederwalddenkmal was unveiled by the sculptor Johannes Schilling.

Inauguration of the Niederwalddenkmal. Painting by Klein-Chevalier, 1883

As one of the most important German monuments of the 19th century, the Germania sculpture contains numerous historical references and connotations. The figure of Germania – for whom, incidentally, Schilling's daughter Clara was the model – personified the German nation. In France, Great Britain and Switzerland the symbolic figures of 'Marianne', 'Britannia' and 'Helvetia' served very similar purposes.

The iconographic scheme

Germania

Her battle won, the Germania on the Niederwalddenkmal stands in front of a throne adorned with figures of eagles on the right and left, and is poised to take her seat upon it. Crowned with an oak wreath as a symbol of victory, she wears a cuirass with an embossed imperial eagle on the front and a brocade robe with animal motifs from German myths and legends (such as the dragon from the Nibelungen saga) woven into it. As a symbol of truce, the sword Germania holds in her left hand is lowered. In her right hand she holds the new imperial crown aloft, ready to place it upon her own head. Her gaze is not – as is often mistakenly assumed – directed westwards toward France in a provocative manner; in fact Germania faces to the east, towards the Rheingau, and presents the imperial crown to the German nation. At the base of the pedestal upon which Germania stands is a frieze with the imperial eagle at the front and the coats of arms of the 25 unified states in the German Empire.

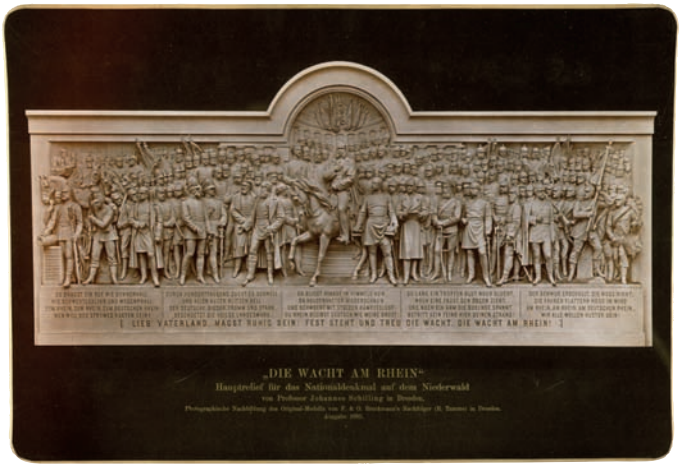
The above-mentioned main inscription on the pedestal of the statue is an example of deliberate historical misrepresentation. The use of the term "re-establishment" is intended to place the Wilhelmine German Empire within the tradition of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation (which had come to an end in 1806) in an attempt to construct its own historical legitimacy. And there is even less justification for the reference to a "unanimous, victorious uprising of the

Side relief panel "Departure of the Soldiers"

German people": the foundation of the German Empire was by no means the result of a popular uprising 'from below'; in fact it was achieved by a small power elite 'from above'. The German people play a minor role on the national monument, appearing only on the two relatively small relief panels on either side of the base. The relief on the left-hand side, entitled "Departure of the Soldiers", depicts a Bavarian cavalryman, a Prussian infantryman and a north German Landwehr soldier bidding farewell to their parents, wife and children respectively (L–R).

The war these soldiers are about to fight in is represented by a colossal figure bearing the attributes of the Archangel Michael, which is placed at the front western corner of the monument. With wings made of eagle feathers and a sword in his right hand, the archangel is blowing hard into the clarion that is pointing in the direction of the main relief panel. Here, the army commanders are gathering around their supreme commander, King Wilhelm, as they prepare to wage

Allegory of war



Main relief panel

war against France. The almost 11-metre-long and approx. 2.6-metre-high relief panel on the front of the Niederwalddenkmal portrays most of the 133 nearly life-size figures with portrait-like accuracy. In a central rotunda we see the proud figure of Wilhelm on horseback, surrounded by the ruling princes and the highest-ranking military commanders. To his left is the bareheaded figure of Otto von Bismarck holding the charter that confirms the foundation of the empire. The north German generals are shown on the right-hand side of the relief, the south German ones on the left. A few simple soldiers can also be seen at the outer edges of the panel.

Inscribed on granite slabs below the main relief is the text of the song “Die Wacht am Rhein” (“The Watch on the Rhine”), shortened by one verse. Taken from a poem written by Max Schneckenburger in 1840, it called upon Germans to defend the border against the expansionist ambitions of their neighbours to the west, and was quickly adopted as a national battle hymn. The fourth verse, which directly named France as Germany’s adversary, was deliberately omitted on the Niederwalddenkmal, and in the second last verse the word ‘Welscher’ (= Frenchy) was replaced by the less specific term ‘Feind’ (enemy). These textual modifications toned down the aggressive stance towards France taken in the original poem.

Allegory of the Rhine and Mosel

The chorus of this popular song extends across the full width of the relief panel, underlining the main message of the Niederwalddenkmal: "Lieb' Vaterland, magst ruhig sein: Fest steht und treu die Wacht. Die Wacht am Rhein!" ("Dear Fatherland, no danger thine; Firm stand thy sons to watch the Rhine!"), Below the main relief on a projecting base platform, allegorical figures representing the rivers Rhine and Mosel recall the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine – agreed in the Treaty of Frankfurt on May 10, 1871 – as Germany's most important territorial gain. Father Rhine hands over the watch-horn, and thus the job of guarding the western border of the German Empire, to his daughter, the Mosel.

The eastern side of the Niederwalddenkmal pays tribute to the end of the war and to peace. The relief on the right-hand side of the base depicts the long-awaited "Return of the Soldiers". Four palm branches on the edges of the pedestal are dedicated to the more than 40,000 German soldiers killed in the war of 1870–71.

Side relief panel "Return of the Soldiers"

Allegory of peace

Around 80,000 lives were lost on the French side. As a counterpart to the allegory of war, Schilling placed an allegory of peace at the front eastern corner of the monument. Crowned with a floral wreath, the angel of peace holds a sprig of laurel in his right hand and a fruit-filled cornucopia in his left. His wings are made of swan feathers.

Viewed as a whole, the Niederwalddenkmal is based upon an overall concept that has been carefully devised in terms of form and content. In a horizontal line from west to east, the elements of the memorial recount the history of the Franco-Prussian War: the departure of the soldiers, the allegory of war, the unification of the army around Wilhelm, the allegory of peace and the return of the soldiers. The results of the war of 1870–71 are displayed in a vertical line: the changing of the guard between Rhine and Mosel, Wilhelm I on horseback, the imperial eagle taking flight and Germania personifying the nation state. Emperor Wilhelm I stands at the point where these two lines intersect.

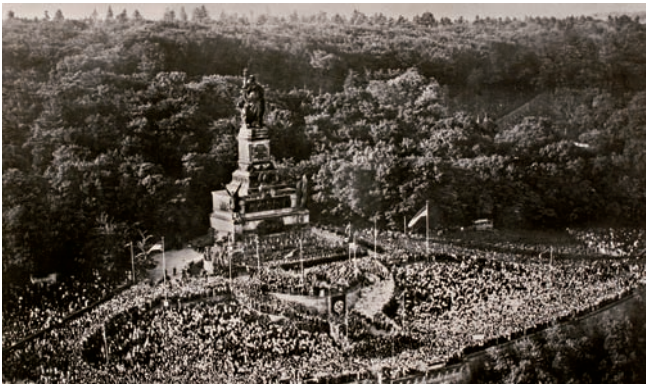
Decorative postcard, c. 1900

Events since the inauguration

Following the inauguration in September 1883, visitors flocked in droves to the Niederwalddenkmal; from 1884/86 onwards they could travel there by rack railway from Rüdesheim or Assmannshausen. Generations of visitors enjoyed the Rhine romanticism and the scenic charms of the Ostein Park in the Niederwald forest with its "Zauberhöhle" (magic cave), "Rundtempel" (round temple) and "Rossel" (an artificial ruin). The national monument, on the other hand, was only rarely in the focus of public attention. Following the abdication of Emperor Wilhelm II and the proclamation of the German republic in November 1918, Germania no longer seemed to be in keeping with the times.

Postcard advertising the rack railway, c. 1935

On August 28, 1933, the National Socialists used the historically significant site for a mass rally focussing on the "return of the Saarland", at which Adolf Hitler gave the main speech. The rack railway, having been shut down at the beginning of the Second World War in September 1939, finally had to be dismantled following a heavy air raid on Rüdesheim in November 1944.



Saar rally on August 28, 1933

Commemorative photo from 1937

Cable car to the Niederwalddenkmal, 1956

Visitors returned to Rüdesheim soon after the war ended. In April 1954 a cable car service began from Rüdesheim up to the Niederwalddenkmal. Today the monument is part of the Upper Middle Rhine Valley area that was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002. Every year, around 1.8 million tourists visit the world-famous Niederwalddenkmal and enjoy the spectacular views over the Rhine Valley.

Timeline

1870-71	Franco-Prussian War
1877	Laying of the foundation stone for the Niederwalddenkmal
1883	Inauguration of Germania
1884/86	Opening of the rack railway lines from Rüdesheim and Assmannshausen to the Niederwald
1923	During the French occupation of the Rhineland, the idea of blowing up the Niederwalddenkmal is consider ed
1933	National Socialists hold the Saar rally at the Niederwalddenkmal
1944	A heavy air raid on Rüdesheim results in slight damage to the Germania monument
1949	Buses are run to the Niederwald forest
1954	A gondola cable car service is introduced in Rüdesheim
1968	Establishment of the eagle observatory
1983	Alfred Grosser, a professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris, gives the main speech at a cer emony to mark the centenary of the Germania monument
2002	The Upper Middle Rhine Valley is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site
2006	Reconstruction of the "Rundtempel" (round temple) in the Ostein Park
since 2008	Renovation of the Niederwalddenkmal

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